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DEPT FOR ANDREA BOTTNER (G/IWI), EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: CYPRUS NOMINEE FOR 2008 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE AWARD

REF: SECSTATE 126072

¶11. (SBU) Per reftel action request, Embassy Nicosia nominates anti-trafficking in persons (TIP) activist Eleni ("Elena") Pissaridou for the 2008 Secretary of State's Annual Award for International Women of Courage (IWOC). Pissaridou is the Director of STIGMA, the Organization for the Care of Victims of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, located in Limassol, Cyprus. Embassy points of contact for this nominee are Bicommunal Program Coordinator Juliette Dickstein, DicksteinJA@state.gov, (357) 22-393909, and Political Officer Amy Dahm, DahmAE@state.gov, (357)22-393545.

¶12. (SBU) NAME: Eleni Pissaridou-Kayiatou
TITLE/ ASSOCIATION: Director, STIGMA (Organization for the Care of Victims of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation)
DATE OF BIRTH: 10/03/67
COUNTRY OF BIRTH: Greece
CITIZENSHIP: Dual- Cypriot and Greek (Father is Cypriot)
ADDRESS/ TELEPHONE/ EMAIL: 6 Dromos 38 Street, Kato Polemidia Limassol/ (357) 99-86-71-71/ stigma@cytanet.com.cy
PASSPORT NUMBER: E192915 (Greek)

¶13. (SBU) Post nominates Elena Pissaridou for this award because she has demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights, advancement, and dignity by running the only shelter for trafficking victims in Cyprus. Pissaridou's shelter has assisted more than 300 victims of trafficking since 2004, despite numerous threats to her personal safety and run-ins with some individual Cypriot police, unhappy with her activities. She is an emerging activist whose achievements have not previously been recognized by the Government of Cyprus (GoC) or international community. Embassy officials have notified Pissaridou of her nomination. Her work is instrumental in combating TIP, an Embassy strategic goal.

¶14. (SBU) Pissaridou champions a victim-centered approach to combating TIP and has served as a full-time, unpaid volunteer at the shelter since its opening in February 2004. She performs the whole range of work required to help victims and their children: running the shelter, rescuing victims (often under very dangerous conditions), counseling them, accompanying victims to the police, liaising with the social welfare office and other government agencies, accompanying them to court, and providing basic necessities such as food, clothing, and medical care. Sometimes, because the cabaret owners know her, she must assume a disguise in order to enter the cabarets to rescue the trafficked victims. She has even staged successful one-woman midnight rescues of trafficking victims who have fled their captors by jumping from windows into the back of Pissouridou's pick-up truck. STIGMA also stages awareness campaigns by publishing leaflets in Russian for potential trafficking victims and placing the brochures in source country airports.

¶ 15. (SBU) Pissaridou has put her life, freedom, and personal finances on the line to help trafficking victims. She is often personally threatened by cabaret owners and has been threatened with arrest and deportation (the officer did not realize that she was a dual citizen) by police. She has heard rumors that there is a price on her head (5,000 CYP), and she fears for her life and checks under her car every morning. Pissaridou has even taken out personal loans to satisfy the needs of the shelter.

¶ 16. (SBU) At a time when Cyprus is the only country in Europe on the U.S State Department's TIP Tier 2 Watch List, and there is limited public awareness here that trafficking is even a problem, Pissaridou is a one-woman crusader, activist and guardian angel available 24 hours per day for trafficked victims. She is a living example of how to take action to combat and solve a serious problem, not just talk about it. Since victim protection is very weak in Cyprus and police officers have been arrested for frequenting brothels and colluding with cabaret owners, Elena is the only person to whom many trafficking victims feel they can turn. In addition to earning the trust of trafficking victims, and despite her contentious relationship with some members of the police, she has also managed to earn the trust and respect of high-ranking government officials, and now enjoys direct contact with the Minister of Justice and the Presidential Palace. She also closely cooperates with the head of the police's anti-TIP unit, as well as international organizations La Strada and Stop International.

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